

Holistic veterinary medicine: A small animal practitioner's viewpoint

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I have practiced companion animal veterinary medicine since 1962. During the last ten years I have integrated an increasing amount of holistic medical philosophy into my practice. I now use very little conventional medicine and concentrate my diagnostic and therapeutic efforts on the holistic approach.

Why have I changed my practice philosophy? Holistic medicine offers an increasing scope of treatment — an individuality of patient care and an emphasis on prevention — that conventional medicine cannot express. The conventional approach is usually excellent for the short-term but often fails to grasp the true meaning of disease, often wrestling aimlessly with the chronically ill patient. Chronic allergic dermatitis is a classic example. What do you do after you have dispensed steroid and antibiotics repeatedly, performed intradermal or systemic allergy testing, investigated endocrine function, and conducted skin biopsy to find the diagnosis of a chronic inflammatory skin disease? Holistic medicine offers no quick fix for this patient but has much more to offer as a long-term approach.

What is this mystical “holistic” philosophy, and how does it differ from conventional medicine? On the *diagnostic side*, conventional medicine concentrates on causative agents. The holistic approach is primarily interested in the body's response or lack of response to an insult. A holistic practitioner may employ all the diagnostic tests and clinical pathological resources available, but the interpretation and implications of these tests will differ from those of the conventional practitioner.

As an example, chronic bacterial otitis externa from a conventional standpoint is looked upon as a persistent bacterial ear infection, and is treated with antibiotics to reduce the numbers of bacteria, and perhaps steroid to reduce the inflammation and pain involved. The holistic approach does not concern itself with the type of bacteria and the type of antibiotic that is going to work, but rather investigates why the body has allowed this to happen in the first place — exploring

the lack of immune response from the patient. The ear infection is indicative of an internal upset. The real problem may not be associated with the ear at all. The holistic veterinarian must investigate things other than the obvious — an approach to the entire patient — looking at the digestive system, the psychological state, and certainly the immune system. All of these, in combination or separately, may be playing an integral part in the problems that we are confronted with. If possible, the holistic practitioner does not suppress the immune response with steroids or even pain relievers, but prefers to use the presenting problem as a diagnostic benchmark for assessment of therapy.

The conventional practitioner reduces the diagnosis to a labelled simple disease entity such as otitis externa and the therapy is likewise reduced to a simple medication. Seldom does conventional medicine address why the infection has occurred in the first place. The holistic veterinarian must try to determine the true reason for the infection to determine how to permanently prevent recurrence. This must involve a comprehensive examination of the patient's history, along with a careful examination of the entire body. A good client liaison is essential both for diagnosis and therapy. It is obvious that not every pet owner makes a good candidate for the holistic approach to their pet's problems.

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On the *therapeutic side*, the gulf between the conventional practitioner and the holistic philosophy widens. The conventional practitioner generally imposes medication to nullify clinical signs. This is usually accomplished with invasive drugs that either destroy the offending organism or alter body chemistry such that the effects of the offending invaders are lessened. The holistic practitioner, on the other hand, is patient-oriented and attempts to stimulate the body to repair itself. The emphasis is on encouraging the patient's defence mechanisms. The holistic veterinarian attempts to provide the body with an optimal nutritional status to facilitate maximal patient response. This approach does not always have the quick dramatic beneficial

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effects that the conventional approach appears to have. But the holistic approach modifies the body in a very positive way, not only eventually correcting the apparent problems, but ensuring continued patient health.

The avoidance of invasive medications frees the holistic practitioner from any of the iatrogenic problems so common in modern clinical medicine. The holistic therapeutic regimes have no side-effects, creating effective changes in the patient while not creating new problems to compromise the patient's ability to recover.

The holistic therapeutic tools

Holistic practitioners have the freedom to concentrate on a specific or a multifaceted approach to therapy. I have incorporated four "tools" into my holistic practice. There are holistic colleagues who specialize in one modality, and others who use a more varied approach than I choose to employ. It is this freedom to apply vastly different types of treatments that makes holistic medicine so interesting and provides a therapeutic scope that never seems to end. My treatment regime includes orthomolecular, homeopathic, acupuncture, and chiropractic approaches.

1. *Orthomolecular medicine* — This therapy involves the use of vitamins, minerals, amino acids, fatty acids, enzymes, coenzymes, and glandular concentrates in therapeutic doses to provide the patient with optimal nutritional status at the cellular level. Individual patient deviation from the optimum can be corrected with mineral and accessory factor supplementation. The precise tissue levels of minerals can be determined with atomic emission spectrophotometry. The scope of this field is vast — the interaction of the patient's individual biochemistry and nutritional status can be monitored and changed dramatically with knowledgeable supplementation. The use of this approach is not only rewarding to the patient but opens up new vistas for patient wellness assessment and therapy. It is my personal conviction that optimal nutritional status should be our primary goal as healers. If this were achieved, then there would be little need for other medications or procedures. Patient individuality and lack of orthomolecular nutritional diagnostic interpretation abilities is a limiting factor in achieving the utopian world where preventing disease supplants the need for "therapy". On a day-to-day basis, orthomolecular medicine is a primary tool for all of my treatments both as preventive and corrective therapy.

2. *Homeopathy* — Homeopathic medications are used much more widely outside of North America than within. These are natural substances, of plant origin such as arnica or belladonna, mineral sources such as cuprum metallicum and kali phosphoricum, or "animal" origin such as apis mellifica and lachesis. They are diluted and "potentized" through succussion to exacting standards, and are regulated according to strict pharmacological principles. When employed properly, they can cause significant therapeutic changes in body biochemistry. The "remedies", as they are called, stimulate the body's immune system in specific ways. There are over 1,000 of these remedies to choose

from, and there is an individual patient's reaction to assess in each application. The computer has been a tremendous asset in helping to analyze the vast amount of information available on the choice and use of these medications. This is often an intimidating field of medicine, but one that I find not only effective but challenging in everyday clinical practice.

3. *Acupuncture — Meridian Therapy* — Acupuncture, like homeopathic remedies, stimulates the immune system by altering the bioenergetic fields which modulate the body's activity. Electro-magnetic energy tracks (called meridians) flow throughout our patient's bodies. It is the stimulation or sedation of these meridians that can be used as diagnostic and therapeutic tools by the practitioner. These meridians have been investigated carefully for our companion and other domestic animals. The methods of stimulation or sedation can be varied — needles, pressure, laser, light, or electrical. I employ acupuncture daily as a useful adjunct to other therapeutic tools stimulating my patients into improved health.

4. *Chiropractic* — The practice of manipulating the spine and other parts of the musculoskeletal system to bring the body into harmony has been employed for many years. Illness creates body imbalances. Nowhere is this more evident than in the spinal column and adjacent structures. These imbalances can be effectively corrected manually with appropriate physical adjustment. We have much to learn about how valuable this can be in veterinary practice. I am employing more and more effort to make this an integrated part of my holistic program for creating patient wellness.

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provide an environment conducive to healing
or preventing disease**

My holistic approach

When I am confronted with a chronic case of any type, I determine why the patient is "out of whack". I don't look for just the presenting signs or presumed symptoms, but I try to get an overall view of nutritional or hormonal reasons for the patient's system to be biochemically unbalanced. I assess the digestive system with a detailed history along with laboratory data. Enzyme, protein and fat digestive tests are used, indican production is ascertained, and radiography and biopsy results are reviewed if required. I judge his/her own individual ability to assimilate nutrients and explore what is being provided for consumption and how it is being processed. I gauge the pet's immune status by investigating clinical chemistry results along with stress-related tissue mineral levels. I evaluate the patient's history relating to what invasive medications or devastating conditions have depressed the body's defence system. I also review, with the owner's help, the apparent mental state of the patient and determine what physical and psychological environmental influences are important in judging the total health

status over the last several months. I try to involve the pet's owner in every aspect of my investigation — he/she is my number one ally and an absolute necessity for the success of my therapy.

Holistic medical approaches are not for everyone. Those of us who advocate this approach sometimes appear to be antagonistic to our conventional colleagues. This is only because of the basic philosophical differences, and should not be overreacted to. I employ conventional medicines in my day-to-day practice. There are times when antibiotics and even steroids have a role to play. Where possible, I prefer using the holistic philosophy. Nurturing the patient to heal itself and guiding the pet owner into providing an environment that will ensure continuing health is much more satisfying than the problem-oriented conventional therapy that is often only effective at repairing the tip of the iceberg. Holistic medical approaches work — extremely well! As my practice clientele changes (or I alter the attitudes of my clients), I am able to get the type of cooperation needed for this approach. We must constantly remind ourselves of the fact that, as veterinarians (holistic or conventional), we *never* cure any of our patients. The patient itself is the only one who can cure — the best we can do is to stimulate or provide an environment conducive to healing or preventing disease. To me, this is what holistic medicine is all about.

Sources of additional information

1. International Veterinary Acupuncture Society (IVAS)
Dr. Meredith Snader
R.D. 4
Box 216
Chester Springs, Pennsylvania 19425
1-215-827-7742
2. American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association
Carvel G. Tiekert, DVM, *Executive Director*,
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1-301-838-7778
3. International Association for Veterinary Homeopathy
Dr. Jan van der Heul
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4. OMC and Canadian Holistic Medical Association
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Editor's note: This invited commentary is based on a recent talk given by Dr. McCutcheon to the Holistic Health Club at the Ontario Veterinary College.—MGM

Abstract

Plasma and liver copper values in horses with equine degenerative myeloencephalopathy

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Equine degenerative myeloencephalopathy (EDM) is a common spinal cord disease in the horse. The etiology of EDM currently is unknown. In other species, there are similarities in the clinical signs and neuropathological changes observed in EDM and in copper deficiency. The objective of this study was to determine if horses affected with EDM had low levels of plasma or liver copper. Plasma copper values were determined in 25 EDM affected horses and 35 normal horses. Liver copper levels were determined on 13 EDM affected horses and 22 normal horses. Plasma and liver copper values were not significantly lower in EDM affected horses than in control horses.

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